

# FIR TREE

Fall/Winter 2009



91st Division at Fort Hunter Liggett: We have arrived!



# FIR TREE MAGAZINE

Fall/Winter 2009

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The Fir Tree Magazine serves the Soldiers of the 91st Training Brigade, their families and their employers.

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# From Our Commanding General . . .

As the new commander of the 91st Training Brigade (Operations), I would like to share my thoughts on leadership. Although my philosophy is very fundamental, I realize that once you accept the basic tenets you will have the foundation to be a successful leader. My philosophy is as follows:

1. Treat others the way you want to be treated.
2. Always do your best.
3. Do the right thing. Sometimes the hardest decisions involve taking the right actions.
4. Be creative and proactive in your approach to solving problems.

So as you practice this philosophy you can start to develop your understanding of what the attributes of a great leader are. With

over thirty two years of service I have distilled leadership to the following observation:

“A leader is one who has a clear vision of the way ahead and through effective communication and decisive actions can motivate the team to accomplish any mission successfully.”

Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for your continued service and commitment to the Army. Moreover, I would like to thank your families, loved ones, and employers for their sacrifice to allow you to be in this profession.



## Our New Digs . . .

Photos and article by Staff Sgt. Robert L. Van Tuinen

So here we are at Fort Hunter Liggett. What is this place? Where in the world are we? Have you heard any of the stories that I have about Fort Hunter Liggett? Perhaps you have heard that Randolph Hearst gave this land to the federal government in lieu of a tax bill? Or that the Hacienda was his hunting lodge? Is there a story here of William Randolph Hearst and Fort Hunter Liggett's past? Let's look at some of the history of this military installation.

Fort Hunter Liggett is named for Lieutenant General Hunter Liggett (1857-1935). General Liggett commanded the 41<sup>st</sup> National Guard Division and, later, the First Corps of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I. He also served as Chief of Staff for General Pershing. Originally, in 1941, the military dubbed this the Hunter Liggett Military Reservation and in 1975 it was redesignated Fort Hunter Liggett Military Installation. The installation has been under the United States Army Reserve Command since 1993.



The Tidwell Store

So what does William Randolph Hearst Jr. have to do with all of this? In the mid 1800s the gold rush, California statehood and soil rich farmlands stimulated movement into this area. It was then that the small town of Jolon grew into a large community. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Jolon boasted two hotels, three saloons, two blacksmith shops, two stores, a large dance hall, a jail and two “China Towns” for the Chinese gold miners. Many small homestead parcels throughout Fort Hunter Liggett's stream valleys were also taken from the Mexican land grants. In the late 1880s many of these small farms were consolidated into large cattle ranches. In 1920, William Randolph Hearst Jr. bought much of the land and this became his Milpitas Ranch. It was then that the community of Jolon went into decline and in 1929 it burned to the ground, leaving only a hotel, a store, the school and Saint Luke's Church. In 1940 the War Department purchased Hearst's land as well as neighboring farm lands. This dispels our first myth. Hearst did not give the land to the U.S. Government in order to pay his taxes but instead sold it to the War Department who was anticipating that, because of World War II, many Soldiers would need to be trained for combat in the European Theater.

What about the Hacienda? That beautiful building on top of the hill where many of us

have had a well deserved drink. Hearst had the Hacienda designed and built by Julia Morgan as the Milpitas Ranch Headquarters, not a hunting lodge. In fact, Mr. Hearst did not even allow hunting on his property. The Hacienda architecture was designed to be like that of the California Missions and it has been, in the past, mistaken to be the Mission San Antonio de Padua. In 1957, the murals on the interior walls of the Hacienda were painted by Bill Runyan. Mr. Runyan first came to Fort Hunter Liggett as a Soldier and then stayed here as a civil service carpenter and to complete the work on the murals he began while he was a Soldier. This dispels the second rumor about the Hacienda being a hunting lodge.

Well, that gives you a little information about our grand new digs. Stay tuned, there will more interesting and exciting information about Fort Hunter Liggett and the surrounding area to come.

\*Information from [www.liggett.army.mil](http://www.liggett.army.mil) and [www.militarymuseum.org](http://www.militarymuseum.org)



The Hacienda Lodge

# PACIFIC WARRIOR EXERCISE 2009



Photo courtesy of Col. Rob Hartley

Information transfers aren't always exciting, but they are necessary.



Photo by Sgt. Daniel Marquez

Synchronization of training during Pacific Warrior Exercise 2009: One of the 91st Division Non-Commissioned Officers who supervised teams of Opposing Forces trainers, Staff Sgt. Vernon Tang prepares his team for a training mission. The training during each year's exercise is adjusted to encompass the most up-to-date situations and theatre conditions.



Photo by Maj. Gregg A. Moore

By Lt. Col. Marshall Gordon and  
Staff Sgt. Jason Hudson

June was a good month for the 91st Division, and the Soldiers we've been tasked to prepare for overseas operations.

More than a year of planning paid off as thousands of Soldiers from across the country converged on Fort Hunter Liggett. They were able to experience realistic training that mirrors what they'll be doing when they deploy.

The exercise consisted of combat support and combat service support training activities at four bases strategically built at different locations throughout Fort Hunter Liggett. Training ranged from individual skill training to structured unit training, and included time for units to conduct internal staff training and mentoring.

Feedback received during and after the exercise confirmed that the training was battle-focused and relevant to improving both Soldier and unit readiness.

"The training is relevant and it will prepare Soldiers for the missions they will have to complete," said Lt. Col. Jacqueline Gordon, Brigade Operations Officer for the 800th Military Police Brigade.

Another participant, Col. Jerry Olson, said his Regional Support Group (RSG) is expected to deploy and accomplish exactly what they did during Pacific Warrior.

Although the weather was unusually mild for Fort Hunter Liggett, and the Soldiers didn't have to contend with the heavy smoke from forest fires, (a nearby forest fire kept a blanket of smoke over 2008's Pacific Warrior), there were serious issues to consider and deal with.

For an unprecedented second year in a row, the safety team headed by 1st Sgt. Charles Quinones was rated at 100% by the U.S. Army Reserve Command. Expanded medical staffing and all available medical facilities were used to diagnose and treat patients. Quick reaction by staff kept the "rumor mill" from exaggerating medical events out of proportion.

There were only three confirmed cases of the H1N1 flu, but rumors of exposure to the H1N1 virus threatened the conduct of the exercise.

Quick reaction by post and exercise staff and commanders ensured that Strategic Communication principles were applied to



“speak with one voice.” All chains of command distributed factual health information to Soldiers and civilians involved in the exercise. Hygiene and quarantine procedures were instituted during the exercise to limit possible exposure to the H1N1 virus.

Left unanswered, the rumor mill could have been a show stopper. Instead, the quarantine provided real-life training for some medical personnel, and allowed the exercise to continue.

Busy days and nights of little sleep are already underway as the 91st Division staff prepares for two exercises in 2010: Pacific Warrior will now be named Warrior 91 10-01 and is scheduled to be conducted in May, and CSTC 91 10-01 is scheduled to be conducted in June.

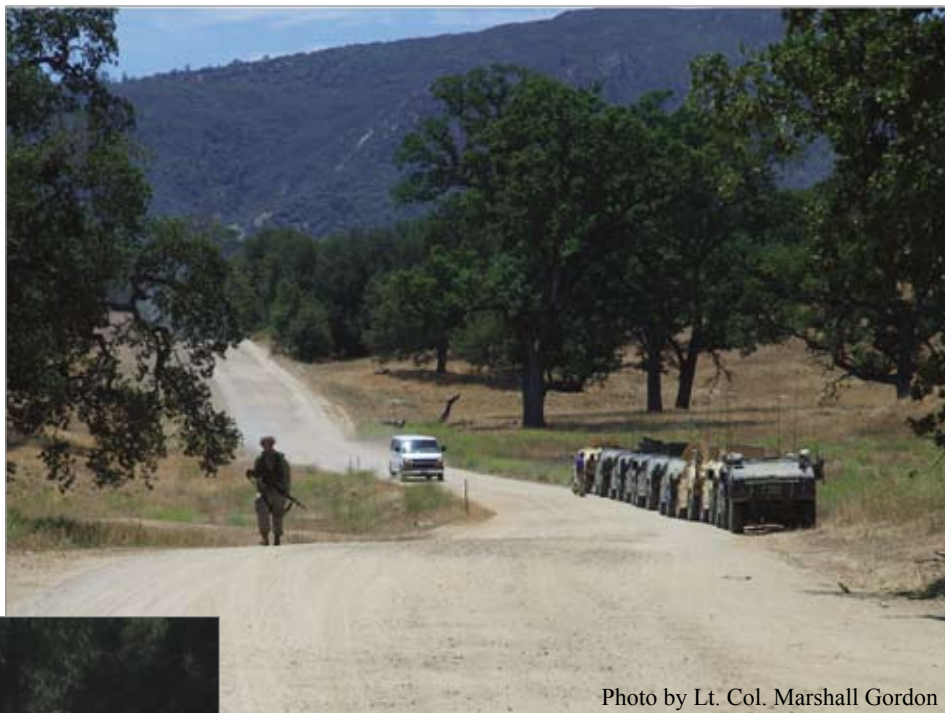


Photo by Lt. Col. Marshall Gordon

Above: Tracking for After Action Review at Pacific Warrior Exercise 2009: Vehicles wait close to the AAR site following a tactical convoy exercise. Vehicles and individual Soldiers involved in the convoy had been carrying Global Positioning System sensors. This allowed for digital review of the exercise, showing the positions of vehicles and individuals throughout the convoy exercise. Participating units were provided a digital copy of the data, for later review and training at home station.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Robert Van Tuinen

Left: An Observer-Controller/Trainer observes training: An OC/T observes individuals training during Pacific Warrior Exercise 2009. Training progressed from individual, to small unit, to collective training, with OC/Ts planning, guiding and assisting in the training, and focusing Soldiers' input during After-Action Reviews.

The USO (United Service Organization) delivered its special brand of comfort, morale and entertainment to the troops at Pacific Warrior again this year. Pictured at right, troops at Contingency Operation Base 8J relax and enjoy the comforts provided by one of the USO's Mobile Canteens. There were three Mobile Canteens at this year's exercise -- some of the comforts they had available were large screen televisions, video games, and refreshments.



Photo courtesy of Col. Rob Hartley

# 'STORIES OF OUR FATHERS'

361st Regiment WWII veterans share personal tales of the War, courage and friendships

By Staff Sgt. (ret) Wally Lane and Staff Sgt. (ret) Catherine Pauley, 91st Division retirees

They were young men – boys really – most drafted – to serve their country during war. These members of the “Greatest Generation” were farmers, mine workers, college students and chefs. They had families waiting back home but battle has a way of bonding men, and the 361st Regiment of the 91st Division – “First to Fight” was no different.

Even 64 years later, this bond is still strong, as the 361st Infantry Association World War II group continues to meet biannually to catch up on family happenings and share “old war” stories.

This year, two generations – the “Baby Boomers” and “Generation X” – of Headquarters, 91st Division Museum, Public Affairs and retirees came together in Evansville, Ind., to hear these stories ... the “Stories of our Fathers.”

## •ANTI-TANK COMPANY, 361st REGIMENT

Tech 3 Edwin Kulawinski was drafted in 1941. He was a first and second cook for an elite country club in Illinois for two summers prior to being drafted. At 23 years old, he was already used to hard work and could cook up a great meal. Kulawinski was destined to be a mess sergeant and was one for the five years he served.

During the 5th Army rest area (Christmas 1944-April 1945), the United States took over three hotels in Montecatini, Italy, for the troops to rotate through from the front lines. Kulawinski was the mess sergeant in one of these hotels. To keep things even, each Soldier had a ticket for one of the three hotels and the mess sergeant would check the ticket and punch it as troops came in to eat. At the end of the line one evening, he said “Ticket, please!” No response. “Ticket, please!” No response. Kulawinski yelled “TICKET, PLEASE!” and looked up ... into the eyes of Gen. Omar Bradley! He thought “ohmygawd, I am busted!” But he wasn’t.

Kulawinski, now 91, stayed an extra year for occupation duty because he met and married his Italian wife, Maria Julianna (Julia). She was the niece of the owner of a huge villa across from the hotel.

## •HEADQUARTERS AND HEADQUARTERS COMPANY, 361st REGIMENT (as told by his widow)

Tech Sgt. Warren Richter was drafted in 1942 at 21 years old. As mess sergeant, he was responsible for taking chow to the front lines. Twelve days before the war ended, he was driving a jeep with chow and drove into a nest of Germans. He and his jeep were taken and Richter was a POW for three weeks. German officer Lt. Alfonso Pitroch was in charge of this group of Nazis, but did not support the Nazi beliefs. As a German officer, he had no choice but to perform his duties. Richter’s widow said he was not treated well during captivity and was often kicked and beaten. He had to use

toilet paper to wrap his feet to keep them from being frostbitten. Richter tried to joke with the Germans and his attitude seemed to work in the favor of Pitroch. The lieutenant took Richter’s billfold and saw a photo of his newborn son and wife and then took his own billfold and showed Richter a photo of his 3-year-old daughter. With the war over, the Nazis didn’t want to hassle with a POW and plotted to kill him but Pitroch came to his rescue. He helped Richter escape through the German lines, providing necessary passwords to make it back to a U.S. unit. The story doesn’t end here, however.

The mail clerk in HHC was Richter’s good friend and he refused

to send all his mail and packages back home or a telegram to Richter’s mother or wife saying he was missing in action. The clerk held hope that Richter would return, but after so many days, was forced to send that telegram. The postmaster in his Missouri hometown knew his mother and wife and when he received the telegram wasn’t sure how he could “break the news” to these friends. When Richter was returned to a U.S. unit, he sent a telegraph home simply stating “I was captured by Germans but am OK. I will tell you about it later.” This telegram got into the hands of

his wife and mother 1 hour before the dreaded telegram arrived, saying he was missing in action.

Richter, who died in 1995 of Lou Gehrig’s disease, and his wife kept in touch with Lt. Pitroch after the war. Mrs. Richter still keeps in touch with Pitroch’s daughter, as the Lieutenant also died many years ago.

## •COMPANY A, 1st BATTALION, 361st REGIMENT

Fred LaVey, a native of Indiana, was drafted in 1943. Tonsillitis kept him from passing his physical so he was sent home to recuperate. On Jan. 26, 1944, he passed his Army physical and reported for duty. During basic training at Camp Blanding, Fla., word got out that anyone who shot a score of 190 or higher out of a possible 200 would become a sniper. “I didn’t like that,” LaVey said. He was a good shot, so when he reached 180, he purposely missed the target for the remaining shots to avoid becoming a sniper.

LaVey was among many 91st Division Soldiers who saw the bodies of Mussolini and his mistress hanging upside down on public display. “People were throwing things at them and spitting on them,” LaVey said. “What a sight!”

LaVey and his wife, Judy, were the reunion hosts.

## •COMPANY B, 1st BATTALION, 361st REGIMENT

Willard Jeffries enlisted as a 19-year-old in 1943. He originally wanted to join the Navy, but the night before he enlisted, he was with friends on a midnight cruise. “I decided that night, the Navy



Photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Hudson

The Ross family was one of several present at the reunion. Pictured here are 361st veteran William Ross (far right) and from left to right, his son Glenn, daughter Barbara, wife Joan, and son Jim.



was not for me,” Jeffries said.

In the winter, bunkered down at Liveragno, Italy, (“Liver and Onions”), the Soldiers had to pump water from a local well. Jeffries said the GIs and the “Krauts” had their own schedule of going to the well. “After so many days, we started waving to each other.”

Jeffries said that many people don’t realize how dark (black) the mountains in Italy are at night. One evening, his squad was walking down a narrow trail below the escarpment. It was so dark, each Soldier had to hold the intrenching tool of the man in front of him, so the squad wouldn’t get separated. All of a sudden, Jeffries, the squad leader, heard noises and told his squad to keep quiet. “All of a sudden, a squad of Germans passed right by us,” Jeffries said. “But it was so dark, they never even saw us.”

#### •COMPANY H, 2ND BATTALION, 361st REGIMENT

Cpl. Alvin Stern enlisted in 1942 at 19 years old. His unit was in a steeple – all that was left of the church – and he borrowed his captain’s field glasses. He instantly spotted a column of “Jerrys” (German soldiers) in a bush. Stern, now 86, called for TOT (time on target) and between anti-tank guns, regimental cannons and 155mm rounds, the Germans were caught off guard and were bombarded with artillery shells.

#### •HEADQUARTERS, 3rd BATTALION, 361st REGIMENT

Private 1st Class Chuck Foster was drafted in 1942 as a wireman. He and a friend, Private 1st Class Leonard Kaczorowski, were in charge of laying wire from the Battalion Command Post to each of the line companies.

New boots were being handed out in Italy but the Quartermaster didn’t have everyone’s sizes. These boots were a “luxury” because leggings were no longer needed. When they got to Foster, he needed a size 7D but the closest size they had was size 6EE. “I took them anyway to get rid of them leggings!” Foster, an avid Indian motorcycle rider, said they were the best fitting boots he ever wore.

Foster, a Michigan native, became the envy of his fellow Soldiers during occupation duty in Venezia-Giulia, Yugoslavia, when he was called up on stage at a USO show in Italy where famous Spanish-born model and actress Eugenia “Jinx” Falkenburg grabbed him and asked, “What can I do for you Soldier boy?” His flustered reply was, “I would sure like one of your autographed tennis balls!” (Jinx was in a famous picture modeling in a sweater holding a tennis ball). There were several stages of famous show-stoppers that evening, which included the Andrews Sisters, Frank Sinatra and Duffy’s Tavern. There was a record number of more than 30,000 Soldiers in attendance.

“I’m still waiting for that tennis ball!” said Foster, the new 361st Infantry Association World War II president.

Leonard Kaczorowski was drafted in 1943 out of Bay City, Mich. In addition to laying wire, he was in charge of the “two-man lift” switchboard. One time when the 3rd Battalion was dismount-



Photo by Lt. Col. Marshall Gordon  
Reunion Host Fred Lavey introducing the reunion’s guest speaker, Col. (ret) Paul Wice.



Left to right: Arthur Peterson, Charles Foster, and Leonard Kaczorowski at the reunion banquet held Sep. 12, 2009.

ing off an LCI (Landing Craft Infantry), Kaczorowski had to lug the switchboard by himself. With it strapped to his back, he said, “The switchboard and I hit the water and instantly sunk!” By the time he was able to recover and get out of the water, the unit was out of sight. “I actually got in trouble for being separated from the company!” said Kaczorowski, the 361st Infantry Association newsletter and mailing list chairman.

#### •COMPANY I, 3rd BATTALION, 361st REGIMENT

Staff Sgt. Thomas Fawcett was drafted in 1943 at 18 years old. While in Italy, Fawcett was given a mattress cover. He asked, “What is this for?” The sergeant told him it was to carry him out if he was killed. Fawcett said he wasn’t planning on dying, so he traded with the Italians for wine! He almost needed that mattress cover one night when he was at the command post. All of a sudden, the Germans were firing towards his position and everyone ducked. After the firing settled, he reached for his canteen and it was empty – a bullet hit it during the attack.

Fawcett was home and discharged as a 20-year-old, but wasn’t old enough to drink or vote. He went to apply for a job with the Virginia State Troopers. The Sergeant asked him, “Boy, how old are you?” When Fawcett told him he was 20, the sergeant said, “You’re too young!” Thomas was so mad he shouted, “Were you in the Army? Did you fight 18 months in Italy?” The trooper said, “No.” Fawcett was so mad, he kicked the sergeant’s desk and stormed out. He realized afterwards that he could have been arrested. It all worked out, however, because the next week the local power company hired him and he worked there for 40 years.

These stories were just a few of the 16 veterans who were able to make the trek to Evansville. The group included Walter Barton, Sylvester J. Carney, Thomas Fawcett, Incoming Association President Charles “Chuck” Foster, John Hart, Willard L. Jeffries, Leonard Kaczorowski, Jerome Kopelov, Edwin Kulawinski, Reunion Host Fred LaVey, Carl W. Peckum, Outgoing Association President Arthur Peterson, William Ross, Norbert Schmuttenmaer, Alvin Stern and Henry Verastegui.

The weekend ended with a Memorial Service to the 361st Infantry Regiment fallen comrades. Each of the 31 names were read, then “Taps” was played by Millard Wilky (VFW Post 1114) and we mourn that 31 more stories are now taken to the grave.

“Day is done, gone the sun, from the hills, from the lake, from the skies. All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.”

For more stories from the 361st reunion, see page 10.

# 91st Division receives new commander, completes



BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES T. COOK

**B**rig. Gen. James T. Cook is now Commanding General of the 91st Division.

Among the messages conveyed in his first address to his unit was a message stressing the importance of their mission.

"With the advent of the overseas contingency operations that are ongoing, it becomes even a more turbulent time. Not only are we transforming, but also, we're (the Army Reserve) remissioning a lot of our units that have been designated to go to Iraq and now support the operations in Afghanistan. What that means to us is that, at this special time, we have to be not only flexible but very responsive in the changes in mission but more importantly in training these units and making sure they're ready to go," he said.

As an active duty officer, Brig. Gen. Cook has performed duties as a mechanized infantry platoon leader for C

Co., 2/7 Cavalry Regiment, Platoon Leader and Executive Officer for 68th Chemical Company, Commander of the 29th Chemical Detachment, and finally as the chemical staff officer G-3, 1st Cavalry Division. After attending the Advance Course at Fort McClellan, Ala., he was assigned as the project manager for the Drill and Transfer System for the Demilitarization of Nerve Agent Munitions. In addition, he was assigned as the project manager for the Chemical Munitions Destruction facility on Johnston Island for the U.S. Army Toxic and Hazardous Materials Agency, Edgewood, Md.

He joined the Army Reserve in 1985 and served in positions as Group and Brigade Chemical Staff Officer, HHC Commander of a General Hospital, stood-up and Commanded a Chemical Battalion Total Army School System (TASS), S-3 of a TASS Combat Service Support Bri-

gade, Commander of the 1st Training Brigade (IET), and later as the Assistant Division Commander (Support) for the 104th Division, Vancouver, Wash. Before coming to the 91st he was the Commanding General, 415th Chemical Brigade, Greenville, S.C.



gade, Commander of the 1st Training Brigade (IET), and later as the Assistant Division Commander (Support) for the 104th Division, Vancouver, Wash. Before coming to the 91st he was the Commanding General, 415th Chemical Brigade, Greenville, S.C.

His military awards include the Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, 4th Oak Leaf Cluster, the Army Commendation Medal, 4th Oak Leaf Cluster, the Army Achievement Medal, Ranger Tab, Parachutist Badge and various other service ribbons to include the Ancient Order of the Dragon Award.

He is a 1994 graduate of the Command and General Staff College and a 2002 graduate of the U.S. Army War College.

Brig. Gen. Cook resides in Burbank, Calif. As a civilian, he is the owner of a nonprofit company specializing in the healing, education, and re-integration of returning wounded warriors.



# transition to 91st Training Brigade (Operations)



Photo by Lt. Col. Marshall Gordon



August 30, 2009



To the Soldiers, Officers, NCOs, and Civilians of the 91<sup>st</sup> Division,

On this, my last official day of command, I want to express my sincere thanks to each and every one of you for your selfless service, devotion to duty, and job well done!

These past four years have gone very quickly for me. It has been a distinct pleasure and a privilege to command the 91<sup>st</sup> Division during an intense period of Army Reserve Transformation while continuing to support the needs of the Army and our National Security interests in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am proud to have been your commander, and prouder still to have served with each of you.

Thank you also for the very thoughtful farewell gift. It will always remind me of our comradeship and the 91<sup>st</sup> Division. Let us never forget the sacrifices of the brave servicemen and women who have worn the 91<sup>st</sup> patch. Jolene and I extend our best wishes to each of you. I know that you continue to add to the outstanding legacy of the 91<sup>st</sup> in the future. Powder River!

Sincerely,

*IT HAS BEEN A  
PRIVILEGE TO SERVE  
WITH EACH OF YOU.  
THANK YOU!  
POWDER RIVER!*

Bruce E. Zukauskas  
Major General  
US Army Reserve



Photo by Staff Sgt. Robert Van Tuinen

Back Row: Arthur Peterson, William Ross, Norbert Schmuttenmaer, Walter Barton, Edwin Kulawinski, Willard Jeffries, and Fred Levay.  
 Middle Row: Fred Kraft, Alvin Stern, Charles "Chuck" Foster, Thomas Fawcett, and Sylvester J. Carney.  
 Front Row: Carl Peckumn, and Leonard Kaczorowski (holding photo of Ines Prieto).

# The 2009 361st Infantry Regiment Reunion

By Staff Sgt. Robert L. Van Tuinen

**E**VANSVILLE, IN -- The weekend of September 11, 2009 a delegation of Soldiers and volunteers from the 91st Division Public Affairs office and Museum traveled here to honor some very special veterans of the 91st Division. It was here that 16 World War II veterans from the 91st Division's 361st Infantry Regiment gathered for a reunion. They took their families on three tours around Evansville, attended 361st Infantry Association meetings, renewed friendships and remembered those who had already passed on.

One of the tours included the LST (Landing Ship Tank) which was built specifically for WWII to carry personnel and vehicles, bringing both right up to land. The 361st veterans experienced these LSTs firsthand.

Welcoming the delegation to their reunion, the veterans and their family members shared stories of their experiences during the war and the lives they've led since coming home.

One veteran, Alvin Stern, spoke of the time the 361st spent as occupiers in Gorizia, Italy. During this time the "361st nearly went to war with Marshal Tito." (Marshal of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito.) "They'd march through town (the 361st) and then Tito would march. We had to run him out of Gorizia, Italy," said Stern.

Another story was told by Terrie Welch, niece of Fred Kraft. Kraft was a jeep driver for different officers during his time in Italy. He also drove his jeep to run wire for communications and to carry messages to the front line. Kraft was driving for a lieu-

tenant colonel when his jeep was hit and destroyed by enemy fire. He was then ordered to temporarily drive a jeep with a communication radio. The lieutenant colonel he had been driving for no longer wanted to use him and wanted him sent to the front line to serve as an infantryman. Although a replacement jeep had been requisitioned for Kraft that would allow him to continue to be a driver for officers, Kraft's friend, Chuck Foster, knew there was only a slim chance that they would receive a replacement jeep for Kraft. He also knew that Kraft was not sufficiently trained in combat to serve on the frontline. When their company had pulled back to a rest area, Foster recruited Aaron Welch to drive him to a rear area where he felt he could acquire a jeep for Kraft. He scouted a quartermaster company and noticed an unoccupied jeep. He "acquired" the jeep for his friend, Kraft. "I know that he (Foster) saved my life," said Kraft. Even though Welch has passed away, Kraft and Foster remain the closest of friends. Kraft credits Foster and Welch with providing him the life he has enjoyed these past 65 years.

Another tidbit shared by Terrie Welch had to do with coffee -- Italian coffee, at least during WWII, was not very tasty. The Soldiers of the 361st would make



Photo courtesy of Terrie Welch

Fred Kraft in his jeep. The jeep was later destroyed by enemy fire.





Photo by Staff Sgt. Robert Van Tuinen

Charles Foster and Fred Kraft, Sept 12, 2009.

coffee from their rations and then lay the grounds out to dry in the sun. These young “entrepreneurs” then wrapped the grounds up and sold them to the Italian people who said they never had better coffee.

Veteran Willard L. Jefferies recalled his time as a POW. Jefferies’ squad had to surrender to the German’s

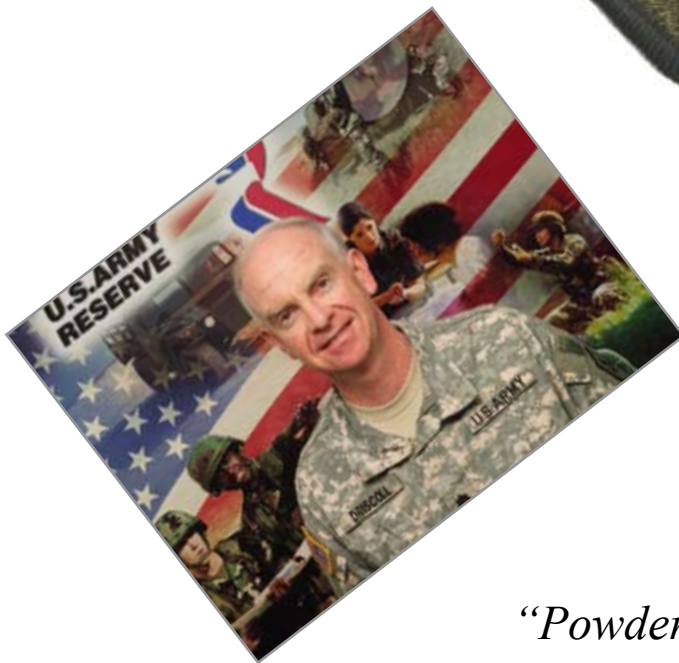
when they were trapped in an escarpment cave. The only thing they had to use for a “white flag” was toilet paper. As a POW he was shipped from Italy into Germany where he was forced to clean

up bomb damage at a rail yard. While on work detail they would barter with locals for food and the guard would look away. They did use a youngster once as a go-between in their negotiations but the guards caught the boy and beat him. After that, they decided not to use children to help in their negotiations.

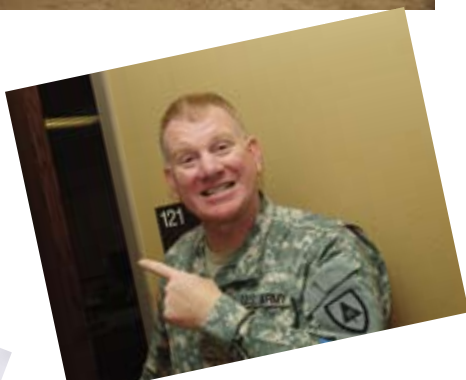
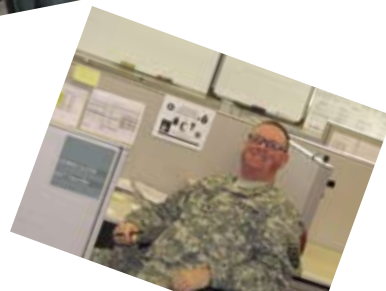
These were just a few of the stories shared at the 361st Infantry Regiment Reunion. It was indeed an honor to share that time with these men who fought, and defeated, the Germans in WWII. As a unit, they entered combat June 3, 1944; during which time they fought and defeated elements of 20 German Divisions and eight special units. The losses inflicted on the Germans by the 361st Infantry Regiment were 7580 captured, 2000 killed, and 3080 wounded. The 361st had 400 captured, 536 killed and 2186 wounded. Clearly the 361st was a powerful Regiment! They were involved in 208 days of combat, finally ending on May 2, 1945.

## PHOTO COLLAGE: SOLDIERS OF THE 91ST DIVISION

Photo Collage by Staff Sgt. Robert Van Tuinen



*“Powder River . . .”*











————— *“Let ‘er buck!”* —————



# Retirements



Col. David Leo  
Retired July 2009

(Photo Not Available)  
Master Sgt. Jose Salud  
Retired May 2009



Lt. Col. Andrew Simmons  
Retired February 2009



Col. David Root  
Retired June 2009



Lt. Col. Daniel Monkiewicz  
Retired June 2009



Lt. Col. Joe Butchart  
Retired July 2009



Col. Eric Lintz  
Retired June 2009

Stratham, N.H. – Major General Robert S. Holmes, US Army (Ret.) of Stratham died on June 10, 2009 after a long and courageous battle with Alzheimer's disease.

He graduated with honors from Norwich University with a B.S. Degree in Mechanical Engineering and later graduated from the Army War College in Carlisle, Pa.

He was the commanding General of the 91st Infantry Division in Fort Baker, Calif., and was instrumental in the West Coast Vietnam Baby Lift after the fall of Saigon.

Services were held June 15th at the Stockbridge Funeral Home, in Exeter, N.H. The burial was in the West View Cemetery, Lexington, Mass.



# The Price of Freedom

(a true story of Thomas Nguyen's 1979 escape out of Vietnam)

by Lt. Col. Thomas Van Nguyen

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**A**pril 1975, I was almost fifteen years old. My father had just retired after 22 years of service in the South Vietnamese Army (he was a Signal Corps Captain) and we were living in my Father's Army Base, 60th Signal Corps Battalion, in Go Vap just outside Tan Son Nhut Airport. I don't know how far away the 60th Signal Corps Battalion was from Tan Son Nhut Airport, but I knew it was not that far, probably between eight and ten kilometers.

Before the Fall of Saigon, every afternoon around 1600 hrs (4PM), I used to climb up and sit on the hot metal-sheet-roof top of my house to watch my favorite scene of the day: the SkyRaiders, A-37s, and F-5Es Fighter Aircraft of the South Vietnamese Air Force returning from their daily sorties. By the time they passed over my house they were already flying at their lowest altitude and forming a horizontal formation (online from left to right). Then the far most aircraft from the left of the formation would turn very sharply to the left, breaking off the formation and descending in a spiraling formation all the way down for landing. This procedure was repeated until the last aircraft landed.

On 21 April 1975, President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned and Tran Van Huong took office as President of South Vietnam, only to resign the following week on 28 April.

The morning of 28 April 1975, Duong Van Minh, known as "Big Minh", took office as President of South Vietnam. A few hours later at around 1100 I saw two A-37 Fighter Aircrafts flying very fast and very low over my house, encircling the Tan Son Nhut Airport before I heard the thundering sounds of bombs being dropped. Immediately, I realized that Tan Son Nhut Airport was being attacked. Then, I heard a series of anti-aircraft gunfire and the exchange gun-fires from the two attack aircrafts amidst the concussive impact of bombs.

Duc, one of my older brothers, ran outside the house and looked up to the sky and yelled out: "The anti aircraft gun shots look beautiful, just like fireworks!!!" Then, my Mom yelled out loud to make sure all of us returned to our bunker inside the house. A few minutes later, there were a few F-5E Fighter Jets from Tan Son Nhut Airbase

that were able to take off, confronted and chased these two A-37s away.

I remember clearly that it was the first time in my life that I saw these F-5E jets flying that low with a full payload of ammunition under its wings and a giant bomb under its belly. A few hours after this event, my parents told us to move out of my father's base to my older sister's house in Phu Nhuan which is closer to downtown Saigon.

My Father used his motorcycle to evacuate our family. I was sitting on the top of his motorcycle's fuel tank. I had my hands holding on the steering bar and my head was tucked just under his chin. Behind him on the back of the motorcycle were Duc and my Mom. Thanh, my oldest brother, had his own mini-motorcycle and he took his older sister, Hoa, on the back.

As soon as we got outside the Base, I couldn't believe what a chaotic scene I saw. Thousands and thousands of people pouring onto the streets they all headed to Saigon, some people riding motor cycles, some riding bicycles, the rest just walking, yet nobody knew where they were going nor what they supposed to do next. My Father stopped and asked one man who was walking with his family: "Where are you going?" the man replied: "I don't know, just headed to Saigon."

We arrived at my older sister's house in the late afternoon that day. As soon as we got inside Huong's house, my Father asked her: "Where is Kieu?" (my cousin who was the 1LT in the South Vietnamese Air Force at the time and he was Air Force Pilot flying C47 Transport Aircraft) Huong replied: "He stopped by this morning riding his motor cycle with another South Vietnamese Air Force Pilot. They both were in their pilot's uniform. Kieu told me that they missed the last flight of the South Vietnamese Air Force evacuating Air Force personnel to Thailand that morning at 9AM and he told me that he and his friend would go out and find out what was going on and come back to let us know." He never returned and that was the last time Huong saw him.

Kieu's mom never heard anything from him again. Now, the only answer I have is that Kieu and his friend were gunned down by the Viet Cong in the streets of Saigon,



Lt. Col. Thomas Nguyen

among all the chaos. Also, in that late afternoon, I saw a group of young South Vietnamese soldiers who stripped off their military uniforms right on the street including their boots; they just left their shorts on.

29th April 1975, just as the sun cast its last sunrises on Saigon for that day, Duong Van Minh announced over the national radio and television network for all South Vietnamese troops to surrender unconditionally to the communist government. It was the darkest moment in my life as I remembered and, certainly, it was the darkest moment for Vietnam.

Immediately that night all of Saigon went dark because nobody was working. Every office and facility was abandoned by its employees. Everyone was trying to find their family and do whatever they thought was the right thing for them at that time. All my father could do was go outside the house get together with some neighbors with the radio on his hand listening to the BBC station broadcasting in Vietnamese from London, to try to understand what was going on. Occasionally, he switched to the Voice of America (VOA) station which was broadcasting in Vietnamese from Washington DC.

The morning of 30 April 1975, our parents decided that we should return to our father's Army Base. We headed out of Huong's house and got to our father's base before noon. Then my father went to his office in the Base to see what was happening and he soon learned that his long-awaited pension check would never come



because the communist had won the war.

I still remember the afternoon that my father came home to let my mom know the bad news. It was around 2PM, May 1, 1975 one day after the communist took over the entire Vietnam and we were still living in my father's Army Base in Govap, Saigon. My mother was crying like a baby for the entire afternoon after she learned about the bad news. My father didn't say a single word. He just sighed heavily every few minutes. He accepted all the consequences no matter how hard and difficult they were.

Two days later, the communist regime ordered all of us, people who lived in the South Vietnamese Military Bases, to leave the Bases within 72 hours or we would face forced eviction. A few hours later, I saw the first group of VC patrolling our Base with AK 47 machine guns in their hands.

The next morning, I was curious enough to take a walk to the main gate connecting the military housing where we live and the Army Base. This gate used to be opened and only closed during business hours. As I approached toward the gate, I realized the gate was permanently closed by concertina wire and the VC booby-trapped the wire with hand grenades hanging on the wires. I decided to walk up close to see whether or not they were real grenades. When I was about 3 feet away from the wire, I realized they were indeed real and I saw a VC guard with AK 47 in his hand only a few feet away on the other side of the wire. He didn't pay attention to me, probably because I looked like a little kid at the time.

I looked down in the opposite direction toward the housing area and I saw a handful of South Vietnamese officers and soldiers from my father's unit standing behind the brushes in front of some houses. Then, I walked toward them and I recognized a few of the men. They had on shorts but were shirtless. As I walked up to them, they pulled me off to the side and told me: "You are stupid!!! You are crazy, that VC could have killed you." That afternoon, my parents moved us back to Huong's house in Phu Nhuan, Saigon.

The following week the Communist Government started to show the documentary film of Dien Bien Phu on national television. For those who are not familiar with the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French Army unit chose the valley of Dien Bien Phu as their base because it is surrounded on three sides by high and dangerous

mountains. Therefore, the French troops only needed to guard one direction, which is the only entrance into this valley.

I guess the French's logic was that the Viet Minh (Vietnamese communist soldiers) didn't have manpower and technology to climb over these high and dangerous mountains to attack them. The French was only partially true in this. The Viet Minh at that time didn't have long range artillery guns to fire artillery shell over these giant mountains to attack the French, nor did they have any aircraft to attack the French. As a result, the French took for granted the protection they got from this natural terrain. I was amazed to see this real black & white documentary film showing the Vietcong using ropes to pull 105mm howitzers including a number of men pushing these guns up the hill and through the thick jungle until the guns were situated near the top of these mountains and surrounding the French. The documentary film showed in some instances where the ropes would slip, or break, sending the howitzer crashing downward running over men who were pushing the gun from below. At other locations, the VCs pulling the ropes got additional help from elephants pulling the guns up hill. While this was going on, there were other groups of Vietcong using digging machines to dig tunnels through the mountain tops at selected locations to house and hide these big guns once they got to these locations. Then there were other groups of VCs (mostly females) whose job was to hand carry the howitzer shells up the mountains to these tunnels. The video showed how determined the Vietcong were to situate themselves at a vantage point in order to defeat the French.

All together, the Vietcong were working like an ant colony in the thick jungle. The peak of the operation happened at night. All the while, this was happening without any knowledge to the French troops stationed on the other side of the mountain. I remember thinking to myself that it would take the Vietcong months to complete the task before they could get ready for an attack. When they finally had every thing they needed to attack the French troops, the order to attack was given, the Vietcong pushed open the well-camouflaged covers of these tunnels and fired their big guns down into the valley where the French troops were stationed. After seeing this documentary film, I understood why the French troops got defeated badly at Dien Bien Phu.



Photo courtesy of Fall of Saigon Marine Association

People evacuating Saigon via a building located within the US Embassy compound.

The following month, my parents learned from their friends that the communist government were giving away jungle land at Cam Duong Village, Long Khanh Province, which is about 80 km north-east of Saigon. My parents took Duc and me to apply for this program.

Each family was given approximately 2 acres of jungle land per person and we turned this land into farmland. I will never forget the day we arrived to accept our land. It was approximately 1230PM. After the local government official measured and marked our portion of the land, my father immediately took a jungle knife, went to the surrounding trees and chopped off big tree limbs to build our first house before the night fall.

Duc and I followed our father to help and do whatever he told us to do. We had to carry these tree limbs to the exact location to build the house. Every thing was hard labor. We very quickly learned the value of our own labor. The next morning, Duc and I were amazed by all the different kinds of animal footprints around our new and hastily built house.

We soon learned to distinguish wild animal footprints and what they belonged to. We continued to improve our house until we felt comfortable enough to live in it. In order to supply meat for the family, my father taught us to make bamboo traps to catch wild animals: mainly birds and squirrels. We also had to go to the water creek to fish and get water, but this required walking 15 miles in steep-sloped jungle terrain because the water creek is at the bottom of the valley. The most difficult part was carrying the buckets filled with water and walking up the hill in slippery and difficult jungle terrain, all this bare-foot.

The following year, I started to notice the communist soldiers, armed with AK-47s, guarding a large group of former South Vietnamese soldiers leading them from their camp to a remote location walking

through the jungle crossing near our land. These soldiers were looking and gathering timber limbs and carry them back to their camp for cooking. I noticed they used only their bare hands to break the wood, which is a very difficult task because most of it was too big to be broken by hand. One time one of these men walked up to me and asked to borrow my jungle knife. He looked so happy as he talked to me because he knew we were people from the south and not from the north. I didn't know what to say because in my family we could only afford one jungle knife per person and it would cost a lot of money to replace one. So I replied to him that I couldn't let him borrow my knife. He still had a big smile on his face as he walked back to formation. To this day, I will never forget his face. I soon realized how he was feeling, he was so happy to just be in the presence of someone from South Vietnam.

After 2 years of hard laboring, we were able to make a nice farm out of our jungle land. However, soon after, the local communist government announced a new government program to plant rubber trees on this land in an effort to turn the whole area into a government-owned rubber plantation.

The communist regime then confiscated all farm land and ordered all farmers to relocate into the government's concentration area where housing is designed like duplex housing complexes: 2 families living in one house divided only by a thin bamboo wall. I was able to hear my neighbor's snoring every night and I could easily peep through the cracks on the bamboo wall to see my neighbor on the other side of the wall.

I soon learned that this is the communist's favorite tactic to exercise a people control system where everyone can easily overhear or observe others going about their daily conversations and activities.

Farmers had to build their own homes. The communist regime did not compensate or assist in anyway. After the duplex homes were built, farmers now had to walk between 5 to 10 miles to go back to what was once their farmland, depending where their farm used to be, and cultivate the what crops were grown between the government's rubber plants. The maximum time for cultivation between rubber plants is three years; that is when the rubber trees reach their full height, thus preventing any crop harvesting activity in between.

Soon afterwards, the communist regime ordered at least one member from each

household have to work for the government-owned rubber plantation. The salary paid by the communist regime was not enough to feed one person on a daily basis. Duc had to work for the rubber plantation. I came to understand why the communist government gave away this jungle land to people. They did that for a specific reason and they ended up reaping the benefits in the end.

Every year when the harvest was completed, the government ordered all villagers to sell their newly harvested rice and other crops to the communist government at a very dirt-cheap price. The government only allowed each family to keep a very minimal amount of rice and other crops per person per year and they would have their patrols come down to each house in the village and inspect what food and crops each household had based on their headcounts.

The purpose was not to have the people store enough rice and food to feed themselves, but it was so that they would be constantly hungry and looking for other means of food, so the people would be too pre-occupied to think about rising against the government, or they would be too weak from lack of food to rise against the government.

I think this is the principal failure in communism. After the villagers knew that they couldn't keep enough rice and other crops to feed them and their family for the entire year anyway, people started not to make so much crops because they realized that the more they labored to grow crops, the more they would have to sell their crop at a dirt-cheap price to the communist government. This was barely better than actually having communist soldiers come to people's homes and confiscating their crops and property.

In 1978, my father came home from the farm one evening and whispered to my mom, Duc and myself that he had met a former South Vietnamese soldier who secretly informed him and other farmers who were former South Vietnamese soldiers that he was a member of the South Vietnamese guerrilla forces. He said that his commander sent him and other members like him to different villages to recruit and establish local forces. The plan sounded too good. It fitted with every thing we had been dreaming of. Therefore, all of these former South Vietnamese soldiers believed this man immediately.

The plan called for them to establish a local force at each village and identifying one helicopter landing zone so that three

months later, when the "D-Day" came, the United Nation and US forces would arrive in helicopters and land at each village to attack the communist government.

The local force already in placed would receive minimal training from the US and UN soldiers to take over the task of maintaining security to protect the village and the US and UN forces would move on to the next areas and so on and so forth. Need less to say, we all were so happy to hear this plan and we started anxiously awaiting "D Day".

Soon, the secret groups were established and they even made special military ID cards for each member with the title that that person would like to hold based on the person's experience and education in the South Vietnamese Army. They were told to keep their military ID card in a secret place until "D-Day" came.

About one week before the planned "D-Day", the communist soldiers drove their military jeeps to the houses where these secret members lived, entered each house and arrested the secret military member after reading a conviction of being a traitor. Then they blind folded and hand cuffed the person and put him on the back seat of the jeep and went onto the next house. This went on for several days, each day after 9:00pm. After one week, the communists were able to arrest all members of this secret group, needless to say, D-Day never came. During this week, the communist radio channels throughout the country constantly broadcasted the news that the communist government had discovered a big plot involving traitors who conspired to rise against the communist government. The communist radio station boasted that the regime had arrested thousands of members from these secret military organizations throughout the country, mostly from central to southern parts of Vietnam.

After hearing this, I was convinced that the whole D-Day plan was a set-up by the communist government to arrest all of those who were willing and able to assist any guerrilla uprising against the communist government in the future. Communist countries are well known for this kind of strategy. They are willing to kill anyone who even has the slightest thought to go against the government. The age range of most the men arrested was 20 to 55 years old, the most capable age group to fight against the government. I believe that the only reason my father wasn't arrested because he was 61 years old at that time and he was too old



and too weak to be a militant.

About three months later while working on my farm in the late afternoon around 4PM, I heard a series of small arms fire echoing from the mountain in Long Khanh Province. The fighting was so intense and lasted for several hours, until well after the sunset. This was a reminder that the so-called South Vietnamese guerrillas were still alive and fighting.

After the fall of Saigon, we heard that one entire South Vietnamese Infantry Division who was defending Long Khanh at the time didn't surrender. They instead withdrew to the jungle in the mountain and began their guerrilla warfare. However, I realized that without any support from the people and outside sources, I wasn't sure how long they would be able to survive in the jungle. Malaria alone could wipe out most of them without proper medicine.

After five years laboring on my family farm to make a living and to feed my family, Thanh was able to find a man who was trying to organize a secret trip to escape out of Vietnam for freedom. Thanh immediately let my Mom know about this and gave her this man's contact information.

My mom was able to pay for me, Duc and Thanh, seats on a tiny and unseaworthy boat which would participate in a secret and dangerous mission-evading the communist coast guard patrol boats and escaping the country for freedom. We heard many stories about the "boatpeople". Many people made it to find freedom, but many more people died at sea or got captured by the communist police and died in prison. Some people were shot by the communists at sea or on the beach during their attempt to board their boats.

My Mom told us that the organizer said that the best time to escape by small boat out of Vietnam was from January to March because the Pacific Ocean is normally very calm during this time of the year. That was why he planned to escape right after Christmas of 1979.

It was the last week of December, 1979 when my Mom took Duc and me to the southern most province in South Vietnam, Rach Gia. Thanh was working in Saigon; therefore, he went by himself and met us at the organizer's house. Late that night, we all met together at the house of the trip's organizer; I figured he collected a lot of gold pieces from his clients who paid him in order for them to join the trip. The house was a typical thatched house right next to a big lake that connected to a big river, which

in turn, connected to the ocean. Behind the house in the lake and under the shadowing light of the less-than-full moon, I saw a few tiny wooden boats docked behind the house.

Soon after I met Duc and Thanh inside the house, we were escorted to the rear of the house and led onto one of the tiny wooden boats. We were told to lie down on the floor of the boat. The sides were about 5 inches higher than my face when I lay down. Then the guide left us and went back inside the house.

Thanh, Duc, and I were soon being eaten alive by millions of hungry mosquitoes from the lake. About ten minutes later, I heard a motorboat in the distance as it was approaching our boat and soon I saw the searching lights. I knew it belonged to the communist coast guard boat. Then the beams of the searchlight went across our boat as we held our breaths and kept our bodies as close to the bottom of the boat as possible. Fortunately, the communist coast guards did not see us and they left the area. About fifteen minutes later, the guide showed up and led us into the house again. That was our first failed attempt to board our boat.

The next morning my brothers and I met our mom in the house and the organizer put us in a car and took us to a marketplace, which was also a docking area for boats. We were told to dress in dirty clothes and try to blend in as dock workers, to avoid being detected by local people who would most likely notify the communist police. They had to drop us off in small groups of two and four at different places in order to avoid being detected by the local people, too. It was an extremely difficult task if not nearly impossible.

My Mom wanted to see all three of us get onto the boat before she went home, to make sure we were fine. Therefore, she was standing near us while we all pretended not to know one another. While we were standing there, there was an old lady selling food right next to where I stood. I overheard her telling a young female customer, "these people came from Saigon to try to escape by boat." When I heard this, I looked to my mom, (she was about 15 feet away from me

and I was sure she overheard the conversation, too) we didn't know what to do or say. We only could slightly nod to one another, silently acknowledging that we had heard the comments.

After about five hours standing at the market with nothing happened, we were told to move again before the sun set that evening. My mom knew that she couldn't wait to see us off any more so she left and went back home. This was our second failed attempt to escape.

That evening the organizer took all of us one small group at a time, to another quiet beach and told us to walk to the designated location which was a few miles away. We walked in groups of two and four at a time about 500 feet apart and pretended that we did not know each other. While my brothers and I walked, we were followed and approached by a middle-aged man who came to us and said loudly: "I knew you are trying to escape the country why don't you give me all your money and all other things because you won't need those anyway, otherwise I'll call the communist police." I replied to him that we did not have any money. The guy kept following us and repeated the same demand. We didn't know what to do so I finally said to the man in an effort to make him go away from us, "We don't have any money or valuables with us, why don't you go to the groups behind us they probably have some thing for you." This time the guy left us and went to the groups behind us. This was our third failed attempt.

Late that night, a little after midnight, the organizer took all of us to his house again and we waited until the morning. While at his house Duc, Thanh and I had our asses chewed off by one of the men from the groups behind us because they learned that we told the man who was begging us for money to go to them instead.

The next morning around 6AM December 28, 1979, we were led to a port to catch a ferry to one of the islands. It was about a two hour boat ride from the mainland. Again, we were disguised as local people who went on their daily business and we pretended that we didn't know one another.

Our entire group of forty-three people boarded two ferries. About 9AM our group

got to the island and we were quickly dispersed into groups of two and three people in this marketplace. It was another long day of waiting. By about 2PM we were starving because we didn't even have anything to eat in the morning.

Then I saw the organizer approaching and he was carrying a long banana branch which had about fifteen bunches of

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***"I raised my right foot and I saw the white bone of my toe for a few seconds before it was covered with blood."***

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the giant banana. Three of those bananas would fill my stomach. He looked around and recognized his group and he dropped the banana branch on the ground at the center of the group and left. Then the people in the group, one by one came to rip bananas off the bunches and went back to our positions to eat. Within five minutes the whole banana branch was gone. I found it so hilarious but couldn't think of the reason to laugh or smile at this, considering the danger around us at that time.

By 6PM we still did not see our escape boat and we were really worried. Thanh asked the ferry operator for its schedule and he found out that the last ferry to leave this island would be at 7PM. That means if our boat didn't come for us by 7PM, we would be stranded on this island and the communist coast guards would be able to arrest us because people only came to this island in the daytime for the market. No one was allowed to stay over night on this small island.

At 6:50PM, we were told to board a tiny boat, which had just pulled up, and then from this boat we would be transferred onto a bigger boat to finally begin our journey across the Pacific Ocean. We were so happy that our boat had finally showed up. After about one hour we passed another small island and I saw another boat not much bigger than this boat. The only difference was that the new boat had a cover. Then, we were told to transfer onto the bigger boat.

It was about 8:30PM when I climbed onto the bigger boat, it was so dark, I could not see anything at all. When we were all inside the bigger boat, I heard a male voice to my right whispering to the guy next to him, "If you resist or make noise, I'll throw you into the ocean!" then there was another male voice begging, "I'm cooperating

please untie me and remove my blindfold, I'm hurting." After I completely regained my night vision, I looked to my right and could make out the outline of a man sitting against the wall of the boat with his hands tied behind his back and his eyes blindfolded. There were two men sitting on either side, trying to control him. About fifteen minutes later as the boat was speeding toward the ocean, the two men finally untied him and removed his blindfold. I later on learned that this man owned the boat we were using to escape and his long-time friend, the organizer of this group, had pirated this and forced him to go along with the group against his will.

After traveling for about one hour, the men who were piloting the boat asking for a volunteer to go down to the engine chamber of the boat and use an empty can to bail water that had flooded the engine room. No one responded to their request. Finally, the men said with a desperate voice that if nobody did this job, the boat would sink and we would all drown.

Immediately, I volunteered for the job. In the darkness of the night, I realized that the floor of the boat was full of people and I couldn't even get my bare feet between them to walk. I had to climb to the side of the boat and use my hands to grab the girders which supported the roof of the boat. I had to swing from one girder to another until I made my way to the rear of the boat. The boat was about 35 feet long, 10 feet wide and the cover was about 6 feet high yet there were 43 people on this boat. People were sitting on the floor of the boat for the whole journey. They were leaning against each other's back to sleep and rest. Nobody had room to lie down. Yet nobody knew how long this journey would be. We only knew that we were trying to go to Thailand because that was the shortest route for us to reach a refugee camp. Once I got to the rear of the boat, the men showed me a small opening with just barely enough room for one small person to go down. I got down and saw the engine was running.

The floor was extremely slippery and water was several inches above my ankles. The chamber was filthy and I could see under the moonlight the thin layer of oil on top of the water. Needless to say the chamber was filled with engine oil gas and I could hardly breathe. When I squatted down, my face was only 12 inches from the spinning wheel of the engine.

The men gave me an empty metal can and I started taking the water out of the

engine chamber. About half an hour later, I was almost finished and ready to climb back up, when a big wave crashed into the side of the boat and made it lean heavily to one side. My body was thrown toward the engine. I had to lean on my back and my arms forcefully grabbed against the walls of the boat chamber in order to keep my body from sliding toward the engine, but the floor was so slippery, my right foot started sliding toward the spinning wheel. Immediately, I heard a quick chucking noise and 1/3 of my second toe on my right foot was smashed off by the spinning wheel. It was like pushing my toe onto the spinning sandblasting machine and one knuckle of my second toe was gone.

I raised my right foot and I saw the white bone of my toe for a few seconds before it was covered with blood. Then I climbed out of the engine chamber and asked for a piece of fabric to cover the wounded toe. After my repeated pleas, somebody finally gave me a small piece of old fabric mosquito net. I used it to cover my wound. I could feel that my toe was bleeding quite a bit the whole night before it stopped. From then on I didn't know who kept the engine chamber from flooding because I couldn't do it any more.

The next day around 12 Noon, the pilot told me that we were in international waters already, we no longer had to worry about the communist coast guards. I asked the pilot how he knew that we are in international waters. He pointed and said when the ocean water is black that means we are in international waters. I looked down to the water and it was true, the water was no longer blue but black. I looked back at the direction where we just came from and I saw the water in that direction is blue, but from this point on to the other side of the horizon, the ocean water was black. So the pilot must be right, I thought. I guessed that the ocean floor is so deep here that it made the ocean water black.

Then, Thanh and other guys on the boat found a piece of white fabric and tied it on a long wooden stick and stood it up as a sign of S.O.S. Immediately, we saw on the horizon, a big ship rushing toward our boat. The ship was rushing toward our boat with such speed that it made us doubt in our minds that this was someone rushing to help us. We realized they may be Thai pirates that we heard so many horrible stories about.

We then alarmed every body on our boat that we might be robbed by Thai pirates.



All of the women on our boat were terrified because they had heard so many stories about Thai pirates raping women, kidnapping them, or holding them hostage on their ships as sex slaves. And then, when they were tired of these women, they sold them to prostitution rings in Bangkok for money.

So the women on our boat found black engine grease and ash and put them all over on their faces in an effort to make them look dirty and ugly. I didn't know if this would work as I looked at the faces of some of the young women on our boat with black streaked faces, they looked so funny and seemed even more attractive. Again with the imminent danger we were facing, I couldn't even laugh.

Sure enough when the big commercial fishing boat was within sight from our boat, we saw about 30 young Thai men standing on their sun deck observing our boat. They were only dressed in their underwear. The fishing boat circled around our boat twice. I guess they were trying to see if we had any weapons on board. When they determined that it was safe for them to attack us, they cap sided their ship against our boat and these young pirates were swinging ropes from their ship onto our boat.

Each pirate was armed with a small (3-4 inches) fishing knife. Most of the knives were very rusty. I could see these pirates were very amateur. I wasn't impressed with their knives, but I knew that it would be suicidal to resist these pirates because their ship could easily smash ours into pieces and we would all drown. As a result, it was best that we comply with their demands.

First, they conducted a full body search on everyone. I saw the pirates run their hands into the women's undergarments to search for valuables. Some of the pirates knew a few Vietnamese words and they were asking the women questions as they were searching. Questions like, "Where do you want to go?" Amazingly, most women answered these questions truthfully by saying, "We want to go to the US;" another woman said, "I want to go to Germany, Australia, France, etc" You name it, they said them all.

I would never have answered any questions from these pirates because I knew they just wanted to rob us. They took all the valuables they found on the boat. They dumped all the containers on the floor to search for valuables. They even dumped out two five-gallon water jugs. The owner had brought a lot of fresh pineapple on

board for our food supply; the pirates even chopped some of these pineapples in half to see if we were hiding any valuables inside them.

My mom had given Thanh our new jeans and clothes that our older sisters had sent to us from the US, the pirates took them all. After the pirates took all of the valuables from us, some of the pirates asked some of the women if they were hungry. I guessed

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***"Each pirate was armed with a small (3-4 inches) fishing knife."***

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some of these women said yes that's why I saw the pirates gave a big pot of rice soup and some baked fish for them to eat. A handful of the women and men on our boat were eating this soup only to throw up two minutes later because our bodies were too empty and these people were trying to eat too much at one time, their bodies couldn't take it.

One young woman on our boat (later on I learned that she was on the boat with her fiancée) was smiling too often at the pirates. I guessed she was trying to please them so that they would leave her alone. However, the pirates took it as a sign that she liked them. Therefore, one pirate grabbed her wrist and pulled her to the front of our boat and tried to push her up to their ship. The young woman now realized what kind of danger she was in and she started crying out loud like a baby while she was resisting forcefully and was able to slip away from this pirate's hand and ran back inside the boat. Fortunately, the pirate decided to leave her alone and they all went back to their ship and disappeared. That was our boat's first pirate attack. After the pirates left our boat, I found out that the pirates took our only compass. From then on our pilot had to rely only on the positions of the sun, the stars, and the moon to continue our journey.

About three hours later, the pilot told us the worst news. Our only engine had broken down and nobody was able to fix it. The only thing we could do now was drift. I remembered the pilot told me that he had to make sure that our boat stayed perpendicular with the ocean waves in order to keep it from being turned over. That was the reason the pilot had to lie down on the roof of the boat all day and all night, with one hand holding the stirring pole to steer the boat, to watch which way the waves

would go.

During these days at sea, I realized how big and horrible the ocean could be, especially at night. During the day, I would look out on the horizon I wouldn't be able to see a dot of land or tree anywhere. Sometimes, Duc and Thanh pointed out a cargo ship on the horizon but we knew we had no way to catch their attention, we were too far away. Some times Thanh and some other guys on the boat tried to yell out while using every thing they had on the boat to make noise in order to get the attention from these ships, but they did it in vain.

Sometimes at night, I would see beautifully lighted ships on the horizon (later on in the US I found out these were luxury cruise ships). From the horizon, these ships were about the size of my thumb or index finger. I could only look at these beautiful ships from the horizon and wish we could be rescued by them.

One morning I was sitting on the rear of the boat looking inside, to see how everyone was doing and I saw many people on the floor of the boat holding a small plastic bag of green liquid. It looked like soda! I thought to myself "somebody brought soda with them and gave to everyone inside. How come they didn't give me one?" Then I saw a man sitting in the middle of the group raising his bag to his mouth and throwing up into the bag. I saw the green liquid come out from his mouth. Then I realized that their bodies were so empty and they threw up their green liquid from their liver or internal organ. That's not a good sign for them.

Finally, after two days floating on the ocean, one morning around 10AM a cargo ship passed by close enough that they saw us and they tried to communicate with us. When they positioned their ship close enough to our boat, I thought to myself, "Oh! My God!!!" From our boat I looked up to their cargo ship and it was so gigantic. It was like looking up to a two or three story tall building. Only Duc and Thanh could speak some English on our boat, so they were crying out loud to talk to them, but they couldn't hear us.

The sailors from the commercial ship dropped a rope ladder down to our boat and let Duc and Thanh climb up to their ship and told them why we were here and where we wanted to go. About an hour later, Thanh and Duc came back down to our boat and told us that the cargo ship was on its way to Singapore. The Captain of the ship said Singapore didn't accept refugee

at that time. However, what they could do was tow our boat along and when they passed by Malaysia, they'd let us go and we could go straight to Malaysia.

Thanh then repeated the instructions from the Captain of the commercial ship that all women and children on our boat climb up to the cargo ship, but all men were directed to remain on our boat. After all the women and children from our boat climbed up to the cargo ship, the sailors from the cargo ships threw us a big rope and signaled for us to tie the rope to the front of our boat and they began to tow it behind their ship. I guessed the rope to be about three hundred feet long and the cargo ship was probably running on its lowest gear. However, the speed was still too fast for our little boat. About one hour later we started to hear cracking sounds coming from all directions in our boat and my older brothers were trying to signal for the cargo ship to slow down, but nobody saw or heard us.

Thanh was really worried that our boat wouldn't make it through the night, so he found two empty 5-gallon plastic jugs and gave one to me and one to Duc and told us to hold on to them if the boat sank. To be honest, at that time I wasn't afraid about dying because I was so close to death so many times before already. I just took the jug to make Thanh happy, and then I put it aside.

That night was the most horrible night for us because at night the waves are bigger and the ocean is more violent. I heard the cracking noise from my boat every second and some times I felt like the boat was tilting so much, we would capsize. Needless to say, we were all soaked by the ocean waves. Thanh, Duc and other young men on our boat were working hard all night to bail out of our boat. It was a miracle that our boat didn't sink that night.

The next day, around 6AM, the cargo ship suddenly stopped and they lowered their rope ladder and all the women and children climbed back down to our boat. Then, they asked Thanh and Duc to climb up to their ship and I saw the Captain point out on to the horizon. Thanh and Duc came back down to our boat and the cargo ship took off. Thanh pointed to the horizon and I could barely see a tiny speck on the horizon. That is Malaysia, Thanh said to everybody on our boat. The only problem was that the engine was not working and our boat was still drifting on the ocean. We are not going anywhere.

A few hours later another miracle hap-

pened, the pilot was able to fix the engine on our boat! We immediately directed our boat toward that tiny speck. It took us a whole day to get out of international waters and into Malaysian water. As we saw more and smaller fishing boats around us, one of them suddenly approached our boat and capsized it, then a handful of men jumped onto our boat as we suddenly realized that these men were pirates.

They searched our boat (they didn't do the body search like the first group of pirates did) and they were disappointed that they couldn't find any valuables. I was sure these must be Malaysian fishermen and I was not as scared as I was before. They armed themselves with small fishing knives, but I saw one pirate with an iron hook on his right wrist (just like Captain Cook, Walt Disney's character) and he was beating it against the wall of our boat, breaking a big piece of wood off the wall.

I knew he was angry because he couldn't find any valuables. We couldn't speak Malaysian nor did these men speak English so we had no way to tell them that the first group of pirates already took every thing from us. After searching for about half an hour, the pirates left us and we continued our journey.

About 8PM the darkness of the night once again surrounded us and we saw that we were passing by a small island and there was white neon light on the island. We were happy to see people on the island. However, we saw a few men and they all had long hair and no shirts just have short or pants on. They didn't look like modern men at all. Therefore, we were afraid to come to that island and we kept going. Later on we found out that small island was Pulau Bidong, the largest Vietnamese refugee camp in Malaysia at that time. The Vietnamese refugees living on there didn't bother to cut their hair and so they all had very long hair.

About two hours later we saw a line of trees and mountain terrain and we were sure that we survived the 6-day journey. During that whole time, I only had a few slices of pineapple to eat. I didn't need to drink much water because the pineapple had so much sugar and water in it. I didn't sleep at all during those six days.

With my wounded toe, every day I took a bowl of ocean water and dipped my wounded toe into it for a few minutes to prevent infection and it worked. It must be a miracle that the infection didn't spread to my foot. Amazing how your body reacts

when you are in "survival mode" I didn't feel sleepy nor did I feel hungry. I wanted to stay awake the whole time and to see what happened on our escape. But during this whole time, terrible thoughts filled my mind about the dangers we were facing at sea.

So after knowing that we were going to live and heading to Malaysia, I started to feel "normal" again. But my mind was still wondered, "What if the captain of the commercial ship was wrong and that we were heading back to Vietnam?" "How could we be sure that this was really Malaysia and not Vietnam?" Can you imagine how crazy and stupid we would feel if we found ourselves on the coast of Vietnam again?!!!

While waiting for our boat to come ashore, I saw a young woman on my boat cooking a small pot of rice and she asked me if I would like some. I began to feel hungry but I remembered that the pirates dumped all of our fresh water out. So I asked the lady "where did you find water to cook rice?" The lady replied, "I cooked rice with ocean water!" I never tasted steamed rice cooked in salt water before. So I tried it and put one spoon of rice into my mouth. My God, it was so salty. It was much saltier than if I were to mix table salt into rice itself.

But I didn't have much time to think because at that time there was a big BANG and the boat was shaking violently. Then I heard the voice of our pilot saying, "This is it, we hit the shore! Jump out of the boat and get onto the shore!" This was what we had been waiting for! I jumped out of the boat and into chest deep water. It didn't take long for everyone from our boat to get on shore.

Some men went back to the boat and took every thing they could find and brought them back to shore to build a hasty shelter for every one to sleep until the next morning. The next day, around 6AM I was the first one from the group to awaken. I walked toward the beach where the boat was and did not see it anywhere. Where was our boat? I wondered. Then I looked around me and I saw small pieces of wood all over the beach. I was amazed to learn that our boat was broken into pieces. It was so worn that it couldn't stand the ocean waves hitting it all night.

Soon everyone woke up and Thanh told five other men to make three teams of two men each and they went out in three different directions with the hope to contact the local police and find out where we were.





Photo by Lt. Col. Marshall Gordon

Lt. Col. Thomas Nguyen, (back row, third from right), stands with fellow Soldiers of the 91st Division's G4 section.

Again we hoped that this was not Vietnam, but Malaysia as we were told. About an hour or two later, one of the teams made contact with Malaysian beach patrol soldiers and they led the soldiers to our location to begin the admission process to the refugee camp.

After two days and nights camping on the beach under the guard of the Malaysian Police, we were admitted to the Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp.

#### **PASSING NOTES:**

After we moved into the United Nations' Refugee Camp at Pulau Bidong, Malaysia, the boat owner, who was forced to go with the group by the trip organizer and his men, and the trip organizer could never be friends again. However, the boat owner never filed charges against the trip organizer. His only regret was that the trip organizer should have allowed him to bring his family along.

I and my two older brothers, Thanh and Duc, contacted our older sister who has been living in Falls Church, Virginia, and asked her to start the paper works to spon-

sor us to the USA. We stayed at the Refugee Camp for seven months before we departed for the USA.

I vowed to myself that never again would I live under a communist regime. Either communism without me, or me without communism. This was also one of the main reasons that influenced me to join the US Army later in my life. I'm proud to currently be part of a team of men and women whose job is to protect this nation, its people, and its allies around the world; to make sure people live in freedom.

In November 1991, the rest of my family from Vietnam came to the USA under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) and my family was finally reunited in the US.

On 8 January 2003, my Father passed away at old age (at age 86) in Westminster, Calif.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Thomas Van Nguyen, aka: Tho Van Nguyen, arrived and settled in Annandale, Fairfax County, Virginia in July 1980. He attended NVCC-Annandale Campus from September 1980 to April 1983.

April 1983, he moved to California and continued his education at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), majoring in Civil Engineering and joined the US Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in 1986.

May 1988, he received a BS degree in Civil Engineering and got commissioned in the US Army Reserve as a Second Lieutenant.

His civilian education includes a BS Degree in Civil Engineering from the California State University, Long Beach and a MBA in IT Management from Touro University International, Cypress, Calif.

He has served in the Army Reserve in the following areas: Engineer, Adjutant General, Transportation, and Contracting. He was mobilized from July 1996 to February 1997 in support of the Operation Joint Endeavor (OJE) stationed at Tazsar Airfield, Hungary and also deployed in 2006 and served a tour in Iraq. He is currently a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve's 91st Division. He is married and has two daughters, ages 18 and 19.

# Taps

Maj. Gen. Robert S. Holmes

Died June 10, 2009

91st Div. Commander, 1982-1986

Chester Nessinger  
346th Field Artillery Battalion, WWII

Lt. Gen. Bill Fulton  
363rd Infantry Regiment, WWII

Ben J. Arbuckle  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Alfred Balli  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Arthur Bennetts  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Charles Blackmon  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Clarence Bost  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

C.A. Bowling  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Lyle Bull  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Stuart Cole  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

John J. Colombo  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Roland Corbin  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Roy L. Donald  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Aaron Haataja  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Lindsey Hicks  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

James Hodges  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Donald Kaiser  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Charles Kaune  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Donald Kelly  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Lester Krey  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Solly Laub  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Paul Marsh  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Walter S. Martin  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

John Moehlenbrock  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Joe D. Montoya  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Carson Phelps  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Ines G. Prieto  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Orien V. Pryor  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

John Stamm Jr.  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Ernest Sutton  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Frank Trovato  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Robert Weinspach  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII

Morris Winacoff  
361st Infantry Regiment, WWII